Call for Statehood Came After Study, Nessen Says

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President Ford's recommendation that Puerto Rico be given statehood resulted from a 14-month administration study and wasn't just a last-minute, offhand decision, press secretary Ron Nessen said yesterday.

Nessen took blame for the fact that Ford's announcement in Vail, Colo., on New Year's Eve caught many people—including some Puerto Rican leaders—by surprise.

"We didn't do a very good job of providing background on the President's proposal on statehood for Puerto Rico," he told reporters. "I apologize for that."

Nessen said an advisory committee on Puerto Rico's status was set up in 1973. The panel, comprising members of Congress and Puerto Rican leaders, recommended on Oct. 9, 1975, that Puerto Rico be made "a free associated state" or "compact state."

"It had some of the characteristics of statehood. It also had some of the characteristics of independence."

Nessen said the committee then "directed that the President take one year to study that recommendation and at the end of that year (October, 1976) sent to Congress his recommendation on what should be done about it."

Ford, studying the committee's proposal with advice from the Office of Management and Budget and the Domestic Council, made no recommendation in October because Congress was not in session, Nessen said.

Meanwhile, a Gallup poll taken in the United States released in San Juan yesterday showed 59 per cent in favor of making Puerto Rico the 51st state. No statehood poll on the island has ever shown majority approval for statehood.

The poll, commissioned by a group of Puerto Rican Democrats, was conducted throughout the continental United States from Dec. 8-14, well before President Ford's call for statehood.